DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 391 156 CS 012 347

AUTHOR Mo, Weimin; Shen, Wenju
TITLE Reexamining the Issue of Authenticity in Picture Books.
PUB DATE [95]
NOTE 14p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Asian Americans; Authors; *Childrens Literature; *Cultural Awareness; Cultural Traits; Elementary Education; *Ethnic Stereotypes; Folk Culture; Illustrations; *Picture Books
IDENTIFIERS *Authenticity; Cultural Sensitivity; *Trade Books

ABSTRACT

The cultural authenticity of picture books, for both literary and art quality, is examined. In a study done by the Council on Interracial Books for Children (CIBC) in 1976 "How the Children's Books Distort the Asian American Image," 66 children's books published from 1945 through 1976 were examined and problems of serious stereotypes were found. Of the 24 picture books in the analysis, 22 were found to be "racist, sexist, and elitist." At the 21st Annual International Conference of Children's Literature Association in 1994, a study by Violet H. Harada indicated improvement in authenticity of picture books with 90% of the works using positive non-stereotypical portrayals and 70% presenting authentically described cultural details. Throughout these studies, however, the meaning of "authenticity" is not clearly defined. There is a fundamental difference between the concepts of authenticity and of non-stereotyping. Examples from popular picture books show how sometimes even small errors can be important for the cultural groups in question. Also, members of a cultural group do not always agree with each other on cultural values. Writers and illustrators need to train themselves to distinguish the values, facts, and attitudes which members of a culture as a whole would consider worthy of acceptance and belief. Several studies indicate that folktales represent an extremely high percentage of multicultural picture books. Writers need to carefully select and adapt stories, engaging in research to reflect the culture of origin and to make their value implications compatible with those of recipient cultures. (Contains 6 references.) (CR)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

Weimin Mo and Wenju Shen

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

W. Mo

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

REEXAMINING THE ISSUE OF AUTHENTICITY IN PICTURE BOOKS

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ED 391 156

Achievements Over a Half Century

The Council on Interracial Books for Children (CIBC) did a groundbreak study in 1976, "How the Children's Books Distort the Asian American Image." In that study, sixty-six children's books published from 1945 through 1976 were examined and problems of serious stereotypes were found. Of the twenty-four picture books in the analysis, twenty-two were found to be "racist, sexist, and elitist" and Asians were depicted as looking alike and "choosing to live together in quaint communities in the midst of large cities, clinging to outworn customs" (qtd. in Harada 137).

At the 21st Annual International Conference of the Children's Literature Association, 1994, Violet H. Harada presented her study "Issues of Ethnicity, Authenticity, and Quality in Asian-American Picture Books, 1983-93" which could be considered as a follow-up study of the CIBC's. One of the purposes in the study was "to determine the authenticity of these books" (Haraeda 138). The results of the study, according to the researcher, indicated great improvement in authenticity of picture books: "(1) characters in more than 90 percent of the

CS012347

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

works are positive, nonstereotyped portrayals; (2) Asian-American characters assume a proactive role in resolving their own problems and forging cross-cultural bonds in almost 80 percent of the stories; (3) derogatory language and parodied speech are absent from all of the work; (4) historical information, when present, is accurately presented in all of the titles; (5) cultural details, when included, are authentically described in almost 70 percent of the work; (6) Asian-Americans are realistically depicted through illustrations and photographs in almost 80 percent of the books" (140-141). When the results of these two studies are compared, writers, illustrators, educators, and publishers have every reason to congratulate themselves on the progress they have achieved over a half century in the authenticity of picture books. "What is authenticity?", that question comes to our minds when these findings are further studied.

The Nature of Authenticity

Is it true that authenticity equals nonstereotyped portrayals, positive images, lack of derogatory language, accurate historical information and cultural details, and realistic illustrations put together? Surprisingly, Harada did

not define authenticity in her study. She only stated as the focus of the study that the first issue was "authenticity versus stereotyping" (137). She also mentioned Junko Yokota's elements of "cultural accuracy", that is, "richness of details, authentic handling of dialogues and relationships, and sensitive treatment of issues" (137). Of course, those elements could not be taken seriously as an appropriate definition. Besides, the elements of "cultural accuracy" are criteria Junko Yokota suggested to teachers for selecting quality multicultural children' literature (159-160). Synonyms, generally speaking, do not provide substantial conceptual content. The use of antonyms is not as simple as flipping over a pancake that enables you to see the entire opposite side. It is difficult to examine authenticity without further clarifying such vague coverall terms as "richness of details", "authentic handling", and "sensitive treatment". We do believe there is a fundamental difference between the concept of authenticity and the concept of nonstereotyping.

The first two explanations of the word AUTHENTIC listed in the Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary are: (1) authoritative; (2) worthy of acceptance or belief as confirming to fact or reality: trustworthy (117). These explanations shed some light on the nature of authenticity. Betsy Hearne reminded writers and

illustrators in her exceptional article, "Respect the Source", to establish their cultural authority (34). That means they need to train themselves to distinguish the values, facts, and attitudes which members of the culture as a whole would consider "worthy of acceptance and belief".

Some cultural values, attitudes, or beliefs may be "realistically" reflected in the story but are unnecessarily authentic because members of a culture don't always agree with each other on those values. On the contrary, within a culture, different values are constantly in conflict. New values, beliefs, and attitudes are fighting to take ground in the culture while some old ones, though dying, are still hanging there with a small number of the members. Besides, cultures have impact on each other. They constantly assimilate each other's essence and reject each other's dross. Therefore, cultural values are not something stagnant. If you conform with the values most members of the culture consider worthy acceptance, you have achieved the value authenticity. That is why cameras may provide realistic pictures but unnecessarily authentic ones.

Authenticity and Cultural Acceptance

A good example is the 1939 Caldecott winner,Mei Li, written

and illustrated by Thomas Handworth. Even by today's strict multicultural literature standards, Mei Li is still a commendable book in terms of its authentic literary quality. A girl named Mei Li refused to accept the inferior position Confucian ethic code designated for women and went out like boys and had some exciting adventures at the New Year Fair. The story reflects the essence of the cultural values at that time. By the time the Ching Dynasty was overthrown in 1911, the oppressive and discriminative attitude about women, which was an important part of Confucian ideology, was severely renounced by the Chinese.

However, Thomas Handforth's judgment of aesthetic authenticity was not as accurate as his judgment of value authenticity. Some obvious defects in his art work hurts its endurance as a magnificent book. For instance, the stone lions that look like dogs and the unrealistic use of fans in winter, especially in Peking. A major error in his art work is the depiction of bound feet of Mei Li's mother. It is not that the pictures are not realistic. You could definitely see a lot of women in China in 1939 with bound feet. Nevertheless, this ugly and cruel practice of binding girls' feet had been hated since the day it started and was officially banned when the Ching Dynasty was overthrown. It was not a cultural value acceptable to

most of the Chinese. No one considered bound feet beautiful any more. Besides, their sight always brought memories to people of the pains their mothers and sisters suffered. Only "outsiders" would go to China and enjoy the exotic flavor of bound feet. Throughout more than 4,000 recorded history of China, binding feet was practiced only about 500 years. Based on these defects. Mei Li's art work could be called nonstereotyped, but not authentic.

Several studies indicate that folktales represent an extremely high percentage in multicultural picture books (Cai 170; Hearne 24). They have "become, to many folklorists' horror, one of the primary tradition-bearers of the Twentieth Century" (Hearne 24). Only cultural experience and study could help one gain insights into the essence of a culture. No one holds an inborn patent on it. As Harada's study shows, minority writers and illustrators "may not always identify with their own culture" (138).

Ed Young has ingeniously recreated and/or adapted a number of Chinese folktales. His illustrations for Ai-Ling Louie's Yeh Shen: A Ciderella Story from China and his illustrated adaptation Lon Po Po: A Red Riding Hood Story from China were received with critical acclaim and the latter won the Caldecott Medal. However,

his two other books, one featuring his illustrations for Lafcadio Hearn's The Voice of the Great Bell and Red Thread, fail to meet the standards for authentic understanding of cultural values. In The Voice of the Great Bell a girl sacrificed herself by being melted with the metals to make the bell so that her father could be saved from the death penalty. Two questions raised by Betsy Hearne are to the point: "How do contemporary adaptation and art reflect a folktale's culture of origin?" and "What are the implications when these origins are--and are not--reflected accurately?" (33). The theme of The Voice of the Great Bell rings with a strong Confucian ethical notion of filial piety which, when polarized in reality, requires women to be absolutely obedient, and even sacrificial, to the male sex: father, husband, and son. That ideology has been blamed for psychologically subduing women into the humiliated second-class citizen position for thousands of years.

Similarly, Red Thread is another story which carries an overtone of Confucian ethic code: arranged marriage. The marriage god, so-called "The Old Man Under the Moon", ties each couples' ankles with a piece of red thread in their previous lives to predestine their fiance/fiancee. Since the turn of the century, it has not been a respected tradition in Chinese culture though

it died hard. Some critics eulogize it as Cupid shooting arrows at people to make them fall in love with each other (Cai 173). That romantic comparison is far-fetched because in arranged marriages, there is no love involved. Very often the young couple never see each other before the wedding.

Authenticity and Cultural Conventions

Then what is the relationship between authenticity and intercultural conflict? When a folktale is adapted from one culture to another, the author or illustrator has to consider the possibe value conflict and the recipient culture's capability of accepting the introduced value. Another reason The Voice of the Great Bell and Red Thread have elicited critical reactions is that these values run counter to those which are deeply held in the mainstream culture of this country. Writers and illustrators must be careful about what they select to introduce. Betsy Hearne noted in her "Respect the Source", that "selection dictates how much a story will need to be adapted to translate from one culture to another and how ready it will be absorbed" (34).

One of the authors of this paper was recently adapting a Chinese folktale and ran into a cultural dilemma. In the story there are several scenes that include description of drinking.

Exposing children to drinking is very sensitive in this country. Too many parents and educators are strongly opposed to this kind of exposure. However in Chinese culture, drinking is a culturally-controlled behavior. It is culturally disgraceful and humiliating to lose self-control and behave silly. It is a popular belief that being drunk shouldn't be accepted as an excuse for follies. There is no drinking age. Very young children are allowed by their parents to drink a little on festival occasions. But compared with this country, China's alcoholism couldn't be considered a serious problem at all. Therefore, in spite of the fact that the description is very authentic, after balancing the two traditions, the author reluctantly made an adaptation by changing wine to green tea. The adaptation is compatible with the recipient culture and is still acceptable to the original culture. As Betsy Hearne points out, "Folktales are not born and nourished in isolation; they grow from social experience and cultural tradition" (33). Folktales introduced from another culture often need to be modified in order to suit new social conventions and values of the recipient culture so long as the adaptations are still culturally logical.

Authenticity in Art Work

What, then, is the relationship between authenticity and art quality of multicultural picture books? Actually it is difficult to separate one from the other. A great number of picture books made some mistakes in cultural depiction. It is unfair to accuse them of being stereotyped because in most cases the illustrators don't have a clear fixed pattern in their mind. But their ridiculous errors in art work is too far away from authenticity. Some have dubious depictions of dresses, hairstyles, and architectures, making a tossed salad of Asian cultures. The Paper Crane is such a mixture of Chinese and Japanese cultures. Others mix Asian with Western cultures. The image of dragon in Min-Yo and the Moon Dragon more or less resembles that in Saint George and the Dragon". In Ming Lo Moves the Mountains the characters wear pointed slippers of the Arabian Nights. Anachronism is another common error. Costumes and hairstyles of different historical periods which are 1,300 years apart are thrown into the same story. Examples are The Weaving of a Dream and Everyone Knows What a Dragon Looks like. Generally speaking, if not overgeneralized, a high percentage of illustrators who made this type of mistakes do not have an Asian-sounding name. Too often illustrators borrow moldy folk art motifs like fan- or vase-shaped frames, brick-carving decorations or imitate awkwardly

restaurant-style calligraphy or traditional paintings, only to expose their lack of experience and research.

Cultural authenticity includes the power of imagination and creative perception (Hearne 36). Maybe that is what Yokota means by saying the difference between an insider's perspective and an outsider's perspective (138). In Yeh Shen, Ed Young did not use much of the traditional graphic mode. Even the penal frames are not exactly the traditional ones. His authentic artistic expression is embodied in his original use of the simple page design and the blank space which are very traditional. Also, the creative intermingling of the motif of fish and the story scenes is very poetic but not at all out of sync with the story. Ingenious artistic recreation is a distilate of innovative interpretation of the reality, not of mechanical imitation.

Refinement of Authenticity

In conclusion, authenticity of picture books, for both literary and art quality, is not simply nonstereotypes. When we have made obvious quantitative progress in multicultural picture books, it is time for us to fine tune the definition of authenticity and face the new qualitative challenge. Writers of picture books need to carefully select and adapt stories that

authentically reflect the culture of origin and, at the same time, their value implications are compatible with those of the recipient culture. Illustrators need to establish their cultural credibility by engaging in active research of all aspects of the culture they are going to depict instead of being satisfied with expressing exotica from a wheeling-and-dealing repertoire. Secondly, they need to focus on sharpening their artistic perception and imagination to enhance their artistic expressive capacity.

Works Cited:

Cai, Mingshui. "Images of Chinese and Chinese-Americans Mirrored in Picture Books." Children's Literature in Education. 3 (Sep 1994): 169-91.

Harada, Violet H.. "Issues of Ethnicity, Authenticity, and Quality in Asian-American Picture Books, 1983-93." Journal of Youth Services in Libraries. 2 (1995): 135-49.

Hearne, Betsy. "Citing the Source: Reducing Cultural Chaos in Picture Books, Part One." School Library Journal. 7 (Jul 1993): 22-27.

Hearne, Betsy. "Respect the Source: Reducing Cultural Chaos in Picture Books, Part Two." School Library Journal. 8 (Aug 1993): 33-37.

Yokota, Junko. "Issues in Selecting Multicultural Children's Literature." Language Arts. 3 (Mar 1993): 156-76.

Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary. MA: Springfield, 1989.